



## Journalists and Occupational Trauma

### Overview

- ✓ Up to 95% of journalists report exposure to potentially traumatic events (PTEs) <sup>1</sup>
- ✓ This can lead to a myriad of consequences<sup>12</sup> such as PTSD<sup>13</sup>, depression<sup>15</sup>, substance use<sup>11</sup>, and compassion fatigue
- ✓ Unique factors related to journalists' experiences such as ethical dilemmas (EDs) and workplace culture may further contribute to the development and maintenance of poor mental health outcomes

### Cumulative Trauma Exposure

- ✓ PTE exposure can occur through numerous sources as they may directly witness the event<sup>2-3</sup>, report to a gruesome scene<sup>3</sup>, or repeatedly view detailed imagery and content<sup>4-5</sup>
- ✓ Frequently reported PTEs include receiving threats of violence or physical violence due to their journalistic work<sup>6,12</sup> and reporting traumatic content such as school shootings<sup>3</sup>, motor vehicle accidents, and other events involving significant violence and casualties<sup>2-3</sup>
- ✓ Many journalists cover several traumatic assignments in the same week and on the scene, further increasing their risk for PTSD<sup>3</sup>

### The Role of Ethical Dilemmas and Guilt

- ✓ Journalists often encounter ethical dilemmas (EDs) on the job such as uncertainty about rules of conduct, completing tasks that conflict with personal values<sup>8</sup>, and navigating situations beyond their control or job scope<sup>7-9</sup>
- ✓ Because of the fast pace of media content production following crises, there can be few opportunities to negotiate ethically questionable practices or review rules of conduct<sup>8</sup>
- ✓ Both EDs<sup>8-9</sup> and guilt after exposure to EDs have been associated with more severe PTSD symptoms<sup>8-10</sup>

### Organizational Challenges and Support

- ✓ Journalists rarely receive training on reporting traumatic content and psychological resources<sup>11-12</sup>, even when sought out<sup>5</sup>
- ✓ Vocalizing or displaying psychological struggles are often viewed as signs of weakness and detrimental to their career, leading many to suffer in silence<sup>5,13</sup>
- ✓ Lack of support from organizations may lead to feelings of institutional betrayal (IB) and altered world beliefs, which then in turn can increase PTSD and depression symptom severity and alcohol use<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Journalism students who received trauma training reported increased preparedness for PTEs, sensitivity toward victims when interviewing and reporting, and developed tools to work through ethical dilemmas<sup>16</sup>

Developed by: [Ashley Horodyski](#) and [Michelle Lilly, PhD](#)

© 2023



1. MacDonald, Jasmine B., Gene Hodgins and Anthony J. Saliba. "Trauma Exposure in Journalists: A Systematic Literature Review." *fusion*, no. 11, 2017.
2. Backholm, K., & Björkqvist, K. (2012). The mediating effect of depression between exposure to potentially traumatic events and PTSD in news journalists. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 3(1), 18388. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v3i0.18388>
3. Dadouch, Z., & Lilly, M. M. (2021). Post-Trauma Psychopathology in Journalists: The Influence of Institutional Betrayal and World Assumptions. *Journalism Practice*, 15(7), 955–973. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1755606>
4. Weidmann, A., & Papsdorf, J. (2010). Witnessing Trauma in the Newsroom: Posttraumatic Symptoms in Television Journalists Exposed to Violent News Clips. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*, 198(4), 264–271. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0b013e3181d612bf>
5. Keats, P. A., & Buchanan, M. J. (2013). Covering trauma in Canadian journalism: Exploring the challenges. *Traumatology*, 19(3), 210–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765612466152>
6. *Committee to Protect Journalists – Defending Journalists Worldwide*. (n.d.). Committee to Protect Journalists. Retrieved October 1, 2023, from <https://cpj.org/>
7. Englund L, Bergh Johannesson K and Arnberg FK (2023) Reporting under extreme conditions: journalists' experience of disaster coverage. *Front. Commun.* 8:1060169. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2023.1060169
8. Backholm, K., & Idås, T. (2015). Ethical Dilemmas, Work-Related Guilt, and Posttraumatic Stress Reactions of News Journalists Covering the Terror Attack in Norway in 2011: Ethical Dilemmas Experienced by Journalists. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 28(2), 142–148. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22001>
9. Hornmoen, H., Fonn, B. K., Hyde-Clarke, N., & Hågvar, Y. B. (Eds.). (2020). *Media Health: The Personal in Public Stories* (1st ed.). Universitetsforlaget. <https://doi.org/10.18261/9788215040844-2020>
10. Browne, T., Evangeli, M., & Greenberg, N. (2012). Trauma-related guilt and posttraumatic stress among journalists. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25(2), 207–210. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21678>
11. Buchanan, M., & Keats, P. (2011). Coping with traumatic stress in journalism: A critical ethnographic study. *International Journal of Psychology*, 46(2), 127–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207594.2010.532799>
12. Hughes, S., Iesue, L., De Ortega Bárcenas, H. F., Sandoval, J. C., & Lozano, J. C. (2021). Coping with Occupational Stress in Journalism: Professional Identities and Advocacy as Resources. *Journalism Studies*, 22(8), 971–991. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1910543>
13. Monteiro, S., Marques Pinto, A., & Roberto, M. S. (2016). Job demands, coping, and impacts of occupational stress among journalists: A systematic review. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 25(5), 751–772. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2015.1114470>



14. Smith, R. J., Drevo, S., & Newman, E. (2018). Covering traumatic news stories: Factors associated with post-traumatic stress disorder among journalists. *Stress and Health, 34*(2), 218–226.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2775>
15. MacDonald, J. B., Hodgins, G., Saliba, A. J., & Metcalf, D. A. (2023). Journalists and Depressive Symptoms: A Systematic Literature Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 24*(1), 86–96.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211016022>
16. Maxson, J. (2000). Training Journalism Students to Deal with Trauma: Observing Reporters Behave like 'Creeps.' *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator, 55*(1), 79–86.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/107769580005500109>